

Surfing the Wild Waves Part One: The RAIN Technique for Working with Emotions

By Peter B. Williams

This dharma essay covers how to work wisely with emotions through mindfulness practice.

Probably more than anything else, emotions are the place of deepest attachment. We define our personalities largely through them - "I am a happy person, a sad person, an eager person" - and we tend to lose meditative awareness anytime emotional states occur. I will focus particularly on difficult emotions, as they tend to be where we get most easily hooked into suffering. The techniques below apply also to easier emotions - such as joy or love - and it is skillful to be aware of them, as this lessens our attachment to them.

Because troublesome states are such big obstacles in our lives, leaning to work with them skillfully offers profound relief from suffering. The essence of this skill is learning to welcome emotions without getting overwhelmed by them, walking a middle path between repression and indulgence. Mindfulness allows one to experience difficult states fully, learn from them, and then watch them disappear all by themselves. In the process, one learns self-compassion, patience, and connection with all humanity, since we are all plagued by emotional turmoil. Over time, one's relationship with difficulty changes; mindfulness takes what one considers to be emotional "crap" and turns it into manure, fertilizing one's heart to grow into more openness, tenderness, and joy. This all leads to the confidence that one's mind is workable and a newfound sense of freedom that the Tibetan Buddhist tradition likes to call the "lion's roar." May it be so for you!

The RAIN Approach

What are emotions? Mindfulness practice shows us that an emotion has three components: thoughts, body sensations, and mood or energy. Thoughts are always involved, body sensations are present frequently, and mood is sometimes part of the experience. How do we work with such energies in our meditation? Vipassana teachers at Insight Meditation Society teach a simple and effective approach encapsulated in the acronym RAIN, which stands for recognize,

accept, investigate, and non-identify.

Recognize

This is a big deal. If everyone recognized what they felt, thereby providing the choice to act the emotion out or not, the world would be a completely different place. Imagine if you saw you were angry every time it happened, and could use the pause to decide whether it was skillful to lash out at someone or not? "Being mindful is easy," says my teacher Joseph Goldstein, "Remembering to be mindful is the hard part." This is especially true with emotions; it is very hard to remember to be mindful during the intensity of an emotion.

In meditation, when you do recognize an emotion, you can label it with a simple word such as "fear" or "envy." Brain research shows that "naming is taming," that labeling an emotion gives one a sense of healthy distance from the experience, allowing it to be more easily observable. Don't worry too much about getting the label exactly right. The function of the label is just to connect the mind to the present and make the emotion more workable. If you go into too much thinking around which exact emotion you are experiencing, just note "emotion" or "feeling."

Accept

You can't judge and understand at the same time. If you are judging you are caught in reaction, and you cannot be aware of something if you are reacting to it. In meditation, we stay with our experience, being willing to feel an emotion exactly as it is, without adding layers of interpretation and judgment. This is acceptance. Can we accept so deeply that we can actually be friends with everything that arises? Can we say to anger, or fear, or happiness "I am your friend, no one can know how you feel but me." Can we accept so deeply that if we do react, we can notice even that without judgment (which is just more reaction), and come back to the body sensation of the emotion?

We can accept our emotions best by staying grounded in the body sensations associated with them. The body tends to be the

place of least charge in the midst of an emotional upheaval. In the midst of fear, it is much easier to stay attentive to the tingling in the belly than it is to stay aware of the fear thoughts. The belly does not say, "Oh my gosh, it's 6 weeks before the holidays and I have not even begun shopping and where is all the money going to come from for my 27 cousins and nieces and nephews, not to mention all my siblings." It just says, "tingle, tingle, tingle." Which is the easier aspect of anxiety to be with?

We never know our thoughts to be true. Of course, they are sometimes quite relevant and need to be acted upon, but much of the time our thoughts are just so much confused, unclear, anxious and hypothetical background noise. In this acceptance step, we need to accept the story line of our emotion without judging it, while adopting some ironic distance to the truth of the story. "We'll see" is my favorite response to a panicked storyline. It encapsulates kindness and wisdom. There is no condemnation of the story, but there's a lack of reaction to it. This acceptance of the thoughts without believing them is the key to beginning a wise relationship with emotions.

Adopting an attitude of kindness is an especially important part of this acceptance step. As we start to become more mindful, we may begin to notice emotions that conflict with our self image or that seem inconvenient in certain situations. Because mindfulness gives us such a mirror-like and unflinching take on how we are doing, it forces us to be kind to ourselves. We must learn to accept our foibles and shortcomings and can be secure in the knowledge that any compassion we give ourselves will be planted in our hearts as a gift that we can then give someone else. As the Dalia Lama says, "My religion is kindness," and being kind to our rowdy emotional lives is a huge step towards having a full and healthy heart. The phrase "of course" best encapsulates the attitude of kindness one can take towards their emotions. When an emotion arises, no matter what it is, see if you can give it your best grandmotherly (or fatherly) smile, pat in on the head, and say, "Of course."

Investigate

Something really shifts in our psyche when we start to take interest in what it is like to feel an emotion, rather than being swept away by it. This interest leads us to an experiential, not intellectual, investigation. To investigate emotions, ground your attention in the body,

noticing any thoughts that may arise. We don't ignore the thoughts, but since they can pull us out of the present so easily, we stay with our body sensations, noticing the thoughts in the periphery. It's as if we were staring at the full moon (our body), and noticing stars in the background (thoughts). We investigate the emotion in the body. Where is it in the body? Find its boundaries, its center. What is the texture of the sensation? Tingly? Buzzy? Is it hot or cold? Is there pressure? Is it pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral? What happens to it? (Three things can happen to any phenomenon – it can stay the same, increase, or decrease.) Answer these questions experientially, by feeling the answer, not by thinking it.

Impermanence. The first lesson of investigation: emotions are impermanent. Meditation shows us that emotions change all the time. They might keep coming back because of a recurring thought. But they dissipate soon after the thoughts dissipate. Impermanence is the great liberator, your true friend. You don't have to do anything to get rid of an unpleasant emotion but be aware of it. Impermanence takes care of the rest. Of course, this does not work if you have the agenda to get rid of the emotion by being mindful of it. This is based on aversion, and aversion will be the underground spring that keeps feeding the emotion. However, if we are truly interested in finding out what an emotion feels like, its impermanent nature will reveal itself.

Important advice: rather than "letting go" of your emotions, welcome them. Fully allow them and be mindful of them. If you do truly do this, they will express their energy and eventually go away all by themselves. You don't have to "let go" of an emotion, you only have to "let it go" on its merry way.

Impersonal. The second lesson: emotions are impersonal. When we check in with our bodies we see emotions are just sensation. It's the story that makes them so personal. For example, an occurrence of anxiety might trigger the thought, "There I go again, I'm such an anxious person. When will I ever heal? Therapy's no good. I've spent all this money on it, and I'm still anxious a lot." Without this painful thought pattern, the experience of anxiety is little more than an unpleasant butterfly feeling in the belly.

On a retreat, a meditation teacher told me that the feeling of fear is no more personal than the sound of a passing car. "Yeah, right" I

thought. Later during this meditation retreat, I realized exactly what she meant. I was doing walking meditation in a hallway and felt fear. Mindfulness was fairly strong, so the story behind the fear disappeared fairly quickly and I was just noticing the tingling in the belly. With a jolt, I realized that the sensory texture of this buzzy feeling in the belly was exactly the same as the sound of the buzz of a fluorescent light in the hallway. While the experience was the same, since I attached the notion of "I" to the belly sensation, it felt a lot more problematic. When I dispensed with this notion, I could just feel the buzz, and feel no more concerned about it than I would be about the sound of a fluorescent light.

Non-identify

Notice that if you are aware of an emotion you are not it. You are bigger than it. In this last step, we see that we can experience an emotion like fear, or calm, or joy, but we can't experience the "I" to whom the emotion is supposed to be happening. We see that "I" is always created by a thought or internal image. Thus, our language of emotions needs to shift from "I am happy" to "Happiness is happening." We can be aware of happiness, but not the "I" that happiness is "happening" to. This is non-identification.

We also have the illusion that "I" is making an emotion happen. In fact, emotions just arise from conditions in the mind. One mind moment conditions another. Once on retreat, there was this twang-like click from a thermostat in the meditation hall, almost like a bass, and instantaneously I heard the bass in a John Coltrane tune called "Africa." And I went into bliss and thought, "Ah, infant bliss." And then came the thought, "Infant, oh no!" because I was

remembering the time I was babysitting my infant godson when he was sitting in a car seat in the house. I got this craving for a chocolate chip cookie. I put him a little bit hastily on a laundry basket full of clothes and the thing toppled. And he fell on the carpet and hit his head and started bawling. Eventually he calmed down and began to feel better. But I felt so bad inside because I had the thought, "That happened because of my greed for wanting a cookie." Then I started feeling all the other times I was thoughtless of others: the times I've rushed through a door and didn't hold it for somebody, or cut people off in traffic, or offended people with an offhand joke. I sat there in that unworthiness for quite a while.

Where did that unworthiness come from? From a click in the meditation hall. I never saw the "I." Instead, there was just the witnessing of a cascade of mental events spilling out of itself until it all got really stuck in the difficult emotion of unworthiness. The arising of unworthiness was so impersonal!

A huge healing happens when we begin to see our emotions as impersonal and ephemeral. We can really start to allow our emotions, seeing how workable they all are. Not only are they fickle and changing all the time, but they are not happening to us, and "we" don't make them happen. It's as if airplanes are constantly passing an airport and never landing. We don't have to fuss with planes that never land. They just pass on by.

The essence of working with emotions in meditation is summed up by dharma teacher Anna Douglass: "What we are practicing is non-interference. When you get out of the way, everything self-liberates."